

Esoteric Buddhist Ritual Objects of the Koryŏ Dynasty (936-1392): Vajra Scepters and Vajra Bells

Nelly Georgieva-Russ, Academy of Korean Studies

The Esoteric Buddhist tradition, known in Korea as *milgyo*, or secret teaching, has played important role in the history of Korean Buddhism. Esoteric cults and practices related to Mahayana Buddhism were supposedly present on the Korean peninsula since the introduction of Buddhism in 372 CE. Sutras with esoteric content, such as the *Bhaisajyaguru* Sutra, the *Saddharmapundarika* Sutra, *Suvarnaprabhasa* Sutra etc., as well as dharani sutras were widely spread during the Three Kingdoms period (300-668 CE)¹. Esoteric Buddhism was supported by the royal court both in the Unified Silla (668-935) and Koryŏ (918-1392) periods in connection with *hoguk pulgyo* (Buddhism as National Protector), its rites called to miraculously protect the nation against foreign invaders. Esoteric Buddhism, more than any other Buddhist school, is concerned with worldly needs thus establishing a link between Buddhist spirituality and secular powers. Nevertheless, the absence of an established esoteric school paralleling the Zhenyan in China and Shingon in Japan and the unarticulated presence of Esoteric beliefs and practices within such all-pervasively influential sects as Sŏn or Pure Land Buddhism in Korea has led to the marginal position of this field in Buddhist studies, both in Korea and the West. At the same time, even the scarce data on early Korean Buddhism reveals its profound influence during the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties.

An important factor in the practice of esoteric Buddhism during the Koryŏ is the probable existence of two esoteric sects: the Sinin (Mudra) school and the Ch'ongji (Dhāraṇi) school. Both denominations are first encountered in *Samguk Yusa*, according to which the founding of the Ch'ongji school is associated with the Silla monk Hyet'ŏng.² Nevertheless, the main reliable historical data about this school is a number of records in *Koryŏ-sa* referring to the twelve century and later, about temples belonging to the Ch'ongji sect where esoteric rituals were conducted.³ As becomes clear from a passage in *Samguk Yusa*, the early Koryŏ esoteric ritual was applied in the framework of the tradition inherited from Silla as nation protecting magical practices.⁴ Esoteric practices were an inherent element in Buddhist rituals called to ensure supernatural defense against foreign invaders, such as Khitan, Jürchen and Mongols, who repeatedly threatened the country's independence.

In addition to the Mahayana tradition of Esoteric Buddhism, Koryŏ material culture reveals also a certain presence of Tibetan Lamaism. Endowed with the status of national religion during the Yüan Dynasty, Lamaism naturally infiltrated Late Koryŏ with the Mongol occupation in the period from 1251 to the 1350s. The way of the new religion to Koryŏ was twofold. First, its agents were Korean monks who continued the centuries' long tradition of study and pilgrimage in China. Some of them were appointed a high position at Dadu court, thus having the opportunity to meet Tibetan lamas and become introduced to tantric practices. Nevertheless, this type of esoteric knowledge remained within a limited group of monks and was not able to invoke any significant response among Korean Buddhists. The second and more active way Lamaism penetrated Koryŏ was the personal arrival of Tibetan lamas to the Koryŏ court.⁵ The *Koryŏ-sa* contains, though inconsiderable in number, records

¹ T. vol.14, no.450; T. vol.9, nos.265, 262; T.vol.16, no.664, Sorensen, H. "Esoteric Buddhism in Korea", *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia*, Boston: Wisdom Publications., 2006, pp.61-78: 63

² Ilyon. *Samguk Yusa. Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, translated by Ha Tae-Hung and Grafton K. Mintz, Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2004: 337

³ Sørensen, Esoteric Buddhism in Korea: 70

⁴ Concerning the history of Sinin School during the Koryŏ period Ilyon relates the following: "Early in the reign of King Tejo (Wang Kŏn, the founder of Koryŏ) there were frequent attacks on the country's shores by pirates. The King requested two famous monks, Kwanghak and Taeyŏn <...> to suppress the disturbances by means of the esoteric prayers handed down from Myŏngnang. At the same time, King Taejo elevated Myŏngnang to the same rank as the nine royal fathers of Silla <...> and founded Hyŏnsŏng-sa to perpetuate the sect which he had founded.", *Samguk Yusa* 2004: 338

⁵ H. Sørensen finds the first mention of such arrival in *Koryŏ-sa* dated 1271 CE testifying to the high respect

indicative of the regular practice of Tibetan tantric rituals at the Koryŏ court during the period between the late thirteenth and mid. fourteenth centuries.⁶ Tantric rituals, though not performed on a regular basis, were practiced mostly during the Late Koryŏ period. They were confined to the royal palace and the temples around the capital Kaesŏng and did not receive active response among the larger audience of believers.

Korean Lamaism though not extensively influential, has left behind artworks which occupy their own distinct place in Koryŏ Buddhist art. Some of them became integral parts of the repertoire of symbols of Korean Buddhist art, such as for example mantras and seed-syllables in the sacred Siddham script on temple bells and incense burners as well as printed on paper dharani mandalas. This influence is traceable in metalwork as well. First of all these are vajra scepters and vajra bells - bronze or gilt-bronze ritual implements of pronounced esoteric content, produced abundantly during the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries.

The present paper will examine the iconography of Koryŏ vajra bells, their relation with vajra scepters and will seek to explain the symbolical meaning of these ritual implements, their function and place within the Buddhist ritual.

The vajra and the bell and especially their combination within the ritual are strongly impregnated with symbolism reflecting some of the fundamental tenets of esoteric Buddhism. The vajra holds central position visible in the very name of the tradition - Vajrayana. In Hinduism the vajra stands for the thunderbolt scepter of the war god Indra. Brahma Purana says that the vajra was made from the bones of the sage-recluse Dadhichi⁷. Since his bones have absorbed the energy of the weapons of all gods, the vajra made of them became the most powerful of weapons⁸. With the vajra the war god Indra could slay the dragon Virtra, the serpent of drought, crush innumerable army of demons (asuras), gain control over the rain, lightning, thunder and fertility of the earth. The form of the vajra is described in Aitareya Brahmana as narrow in the beginning and divided in the upper part as a metal club with two prongs.⁹ Vajra in its original shape of a trident with two or three open prongs can be seen as an attribute of Ancient Near Eastern divinities¹⁰. The primary meaning of this Sanskrit word – hard (as a diamond, adamant) along with the ancient idea of the indestructibility of this weapon became crucial in Buddhist context. According to a legend, Shakyamuni took the weapon from Indra and brought together its rays thus transforming the wrathful weapon into a peaceful Buddhist scepter with closed prongs.¹¹ It came to symbolize the Absolute, impenetrable as a diamond, the eternal and unshakable Law, the true Dharma and the indestructible and pure enlightened mind. The ancient relation between the vajra and the lightning came to symbolize the enlightening that strikes the believer on a sudden¹². At the same time, the vajra remains a weapon destructing ignorance, eliminating mundane desires and crushing all enemies of Buddhism. A bellicose Buddhist vajra with open prongs, emphasizing the uncompromisingness in fighting desires and ignorance on the path to enlightenment is common in South-east Asia, in particular in Khmer art.

Vajra scepters (K. *kŭmgang-jŏ*) are composed of a narrow middle section serving as a handle, with both ends shaped as spear-like spikes of one (K. *tokko-jŏ*), three (K. *samgo-jŏ*) and five (K. *ogo-jŏ*) prongs. The number of extant scepters is lesser compared to the numerous vajra bells (K. *kŭmgang-*

Tibetan monks were given at the Koryŏ court, the king himself meeting them personally outside the Sŏnŭimun gate, Sørensen, *Esoteric Buddhism in Korea*: 71

⁶ *Koryŏsa*, vol. 3, chapter 89 (Biographical section, chapter 2), 20b-21a

⁷ According the Rig Veda the vajra was coined by the mythological singer Ushana: Rig Veda I 121, 12; V 34

⁸ For details of the story see Brahma Purana: Pippalada

⁹ Coomarasvami, A.K. *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Fons Vitae: The Matheson Trust, 2006:17. This form initially derives from an ancient wooden weapon, made of the root of a tree with its offshoots let to stick out, and regarded as indestructible by the enemies. See Torchinov, E.A. *Introduction to Buddhology*, St.Petersburg: St. Petersburg Philosophic Society, 2000: 126

¹⁰ Dale Saunders, *Mudra. A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture*, New York: Bollingen Series, 1960 : 184

¹¹ Getty, A. *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928:180, cited in Dale Saunders, *Mudra*: 184

¹² Seckel, D. *The Art of Buddhism*, New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1964: 276

ryōng) which were used with them on a par in the esoteric ritual. Therefore, the five-pronged *vajra* scepter in the collection of the National Museum of Korea is of particular interest. This *vajra*, used only by priests of the highest rank, is saturated with symbolism. It is often read as a mandala, the middle prong symbolizing Vairocana (according other reading – Buddha’s knowledge of the Absolute) and the outer prongs – the four other Buddhas of the Diamond World (Akshobhya, Amitabha, Ratnasambhava and Amoghasiddhi) (or, Buddha knowledge of the Phenomenal). The handle is composed of four bands of eight lotus petals bound by three bands¹³. The *vajra* found in the ruins of Hūngdōk-sa temple near Ch’ōngju belongs to the three-pronged type. Most extant examples of both *vajra* scepters and bells belong to the three- and five-prongs type which speaks of their particular popularity and probably, of a limited circle of ritual actions where these implements were used. The scepter’s drum-shaped handle, bulged in the middle and slightly gouged-out, is decorated with “demon’s eyes” pattern (K. *guimok-munūi*), its knobs being engraved with lotus flowers, while the prongs on both sides build up their own offshoots. These offshoots typical for Korean *vajra* scepters closely follow Chinese examples and resemble animal claws, emphasizing the warlike character of the scepter. The three-pronged *vajra* symbolizes the three mysteries in tantric Buddhism – act, word and thought and was used for ritual consecrations¹⁴.

Another type of a Koryō dynasty *vajra* scepter is the so called “crossed *vajra*” Two three-pronged *vajra* scepters are crossed, the center being shaped as a lotus flower. This *vajra* symbolizes the principle of the absolute stability - in Mt. Meru cosmology it supports the entire physical universe¹⁵. According other readings it represents the Three Mysteries applying to the Four Directions. The theme of the Four Directions is emphasized by the placing of the crossed *vajra* on the four corners of the Great Altar in Shingon ritual.¹⁶

Images of *vajra* on the Korean peninsula date back to the Unified Silla. A famous example is the five-pointed *vajra* as attribute of Indra in Sōkkuram. The *vajra* is also a permanent element in the decoration of Koryō Buddhist sutras – a band of *vajra* scepters surrounds the sutra illustrations, building an analogy with the indestructible and absolute nature of the Dharma.

As already mentioned, partner implements of the *vajra* scepters in the esoteric ritual were the *vajra* bells – implements of significant art historical interest.

Like the *vajra*, the bell (Skr. *ghanta*) is a Brahmanic symbol borrowed in Buddhism. Initially an attribute of the god Shiva accompanying his dance, the bell was accepted in Buddhism, where its sound adopted new symbolical meanings. On the one side it represents the “Voice of the Dharma” spreading through the whole world and invoking the mind of the believers towards enlightenment. On the other side, the bell is closely related to the idea of evanescence. Such perception comes from the impermanence of the sound – one can only hear, but not preserve the sound for it dies away quickly and thus exists only in our perception. Similar to the sound, all things and beings belonging to the phenomenal world exist merely in our imagination; look real but are in reality devoid of their own nature. This parallel has led to the bell becoming an epitome of the Phenomenal World.

The *ghanta* is a bell with a handle shaped as *vajra* and only this type of bell is used together with the *vajra* scepter in the esoteric ritual. The combination of the bell with the *vajra* in one implement symbolizes the unity of the Diamond World represented by the *vajra* handle and the Phenomenal World, referred by the body of the bell, the *ghanta* thus expressing the duality nirvana-samsara. By extension, its *vajra* handle symbolizes Buddha’s mind, the bell stands for Buddha’s body and its sound is perceived as Buddha’s speech when preaching the Dharma – another allusion to the basic practice

¹³ Details on the symbolism of this type of handle see in Dale Saunders, *Mudra*: 190

¹⁴ Esoteric Buddhist practice emphasized the power of the ritual, where *mantras* and *dhāranīs* were practiced in conjunction with physical postures of the body and hand gestures (*mudras*), meditation on sacred cosmic diagrammatic circles dedicated to the main Buddha or other deity (*mandalas*). *Mandalas* affected one’s mind, *mantras* one’s speech and *mudras* one’s body. Thus, their combined effect was a means of achieving the believer’s full transformation by the esoteric ritual. See: Mitchell, Donald. *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002: 147-149

¹⁵ Beer, R. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Boston: Shambhala, 2003: 95

¹⁶ Dale Saunders, *Mudra*: 186

of meditation in esoteric Buddhism combining body/gesture, speech and mind.¹⁷ Besides its symbolism, the sound of the vajra bell has also a “practical” function – it is believed that its pealing is heard in the whole world and attracts the divinities invoked and visualized during the ritual.

The simultaneous use of the *vajra* and the bell in the esoteric ritual is a type of “preaching in action” symbolically indicating to the practitioner the way to enlightenment. Enlightenment is achieved as a result of the integration of wisdom (*prajña*) and method (*upaya*), of emptiness and compassion. In the opposition *prajña-upaya* the *vajra* symbolizes compassion (*karuna*) and skillful means (*upaya*) while wisdom (*prajña*) and emptiness are symbolized by the bell.¹⁸

The number of ringing the vajra bell has its own symbolism, described in the sutras as follows: “Ringing the bell once, just like the true word of the Buddha, means obtaining realization, ringing it twice invokes the Way of descending dragon, ringing it three times invokes the Way of Bhaiṣajyaguru, ringing it four times means realization of the Way of the Heavenly Beings, ringing five times means realization of the Way of the Asuras, six times – accomplishing the Way of the Sages and seven times means lifting of curse”.¹⁹

Five types of ghanta are used in the esoteric ritual: The single-pronged, the three-pronged, the five-pronged bells, the treasure bell and the stupa bell. In the ritual of the Shingon sect these five bells are put on the altar according to the four directions, the stupa bell being placed in the center. The five bells thus form a mandala, where the stupa bell symbolizes Buddha Vajrocana, the five-pronged bell - Aksobhya (to the east), the treasure bell – Ratnasambhava (to the south), the single-pronged bell - Amitabha (to the west) and the three-pronged bell – Amoghasiddhi (to the north)²⁰.

In the ritual, the monk while chanting a mantra holds the vajra in his right hand and the bell – in his left hand, both directions being also linked with the idea of the Diamond-Phenomenal World and *means-wisdom* duality. Depending on the ritual, the movements of the hands holding the implements differ – they can be crossed against the chest thus symbolizing the unity of the two worlds, or move up and downwards, periodically ringing the bell and clashing the bell with the vajra. The same directions disposition can be seen in all sculptural or pictorial representations of deities, holding these two implements as attributes – the Five Vidyarājas and the multiple-armed Avalokitesvara (such is, for example, the Koryō dynasty painting of the Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara at Leeum Museum. Two sculptural examples demonstrate the same arrangement – a Liao dynasty Guanyin statue at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an early Koryō statue of the Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara at the Guimet Museum. The latter demonstrates an alternative version of the pair vajra-ghanta, replacing the vajra scepter with a *phurpa* – a tantric ritual dagger with functions that “cover” only a small part of those of the vajra - conquering evil spirits and destroying obstacles on the path to enlightenment.

About 50 vajra bells are presently extant in Korea and, similarly to the vajra scepters, only those with a handle of three and five prongs are discovered up to now.²¹

In most cases the body of Koryō bells is elaborately decorated with reliefs of guardian deities building four iconographical groups. These are: 1. The Five Vidyarājas (K. *Odaemyōngwang*); 2. The Four Heavenly Kings (*Sach'ōnwang*); 3. Indra (K. *Chesōk-ch'ōn*), Brahma (K. *Pōm-ch'ōn*) and the four Heavenly kings, and 4. The Eight Classes of Beings (K. *P'albusinjang*).

¹⁷ From the perspective of tantric Buddhism all phenomenal things are nirvanic in nature including human beings who are already Buddhas but unaware of it due to ignorance or defilements. According to *Hevajra Tantra* “all Beings are Buddhas, however this fact is obscured by defilements. When these are removed, all beings are doubtlessly at once Buddhas”. See *Hevajra tantra*, II, 4.69, quoted in: Mitchell, Donald. *Buddhism*: 161

¹⁸ Torchinov, *Introduction to Buddhology*: 121-123

¹⁹ *I ch'ieh ju lai ta pi mi wang wei tseng yu tsui shang wei miao ta man na lo ching*. (5 chüan)(一切如來大祕密王未曾有最上微妙大曼拏羅經), T.889, cited in Li Suk-hi, “Koryōsidae kūmgangryōng'üi tosangjök yōngu”: 6

²⁰ Dale Saunders, *Mudra*: 147

²¹ Unlike Buddhist ritual objects of larger size, like Buddhist bells, or incense burners, vajra bells are understudied, being mainly dealt with in general books on Korean metalwork, or exhibition articles. The article by Li Suk-hi, still remains the first and only extensive study of these ritual objects. See: Li Suk-hi, “Koryōsidae kūmgangryōng'üi tosangjök yōngu” (Iconographical Study of Koryo Vajra Bells), *Misulshak Yōngu*, Volume 186, pp.3-51

The first group can be outlined on the example of the vajra bell in the collection of Leeum Museum. Its body is finely decorated with reliefs of the Five Vidyarājas, the space between the figures being densely covered with floral decoration. The Five Vidyarājas are wrathful hypostases of the Five Tathagatas, symbolizing their victory over passions and desires. They represent forms of concentrated energy needed to conquer the mystic knowledge of overcoming the cycle of *samsara*.

The five kings are represented in accordance to their iconographical descriptions in Mahavajrocana Abhisambodhi Tantra²². Acalanatha (K. *Pudongmyōngwang*) – a terrible hypostasis of Vairocana, is recognizable through his symbols of a destroyer of obstacles - a sword called to combat “the three poisons” – greed, anger and ignorance, and the flamed halo, believed to consume all passions. Another attribute is the lasso in his left hand to catch the evil spirits.²³ Next to him stands Trailokyavijaya (K. *Kangsamse*) – the “Victorious over the Three Worlds”, who is the wrathful emanation of Aksobhya. He is represented with four heads surrounded by flames, symbolizing his anger against the three poisons. Two of his eight arms make his specific mudra, called *vajrahumkaramudra*²⁴, while the others hold a bell, an arrow, a sword, a trident, a staff, a bow and a rope. While Acalanatha, paralleling Vajrocana, occupies the center of the imaginary mandala, Trailokyavijaya’s position is on the east. Next to him – to the South, stands Kundali (K. *Kundari*) – the wrathful emanation of Ratnasambhava. The one-headed four-armed deity is seated in the royal-ease posture, particularly characteristic element being his crowned bristling hair. He is half naked, adorned with necklaces and bracelets. The only recognizable attribute is the vajra in his upper right hand. Next to him – on the west, stands the terrible manifestation of Amitabha – Yamantaka (K. *Tae wijōk*). The six armed and six legged deity is clad in a monastic robe and seated on a cow. His six heads are arranged as one main face and five heads in his headdress. This symbolism of the number six refers to the six destinations of rebirth (*gatis*) and accomplishing the six perfections and six magic powers.²⁵ Like the other Vidyarājas, he is surrounded by flames, destroying passions and ignorance. His six hands hold a sword, an arrow, a staff, a trident, a bow and a rope. The fifth deity on the bell is Vajrayaksa – the wrathful emanation of Amoghasiddhi in the north. He is seated on a lotus and represented with one head and three eyes, with bristling hair much like Kundali. His four hands hold a vajra, a lasso and a rosary, the lower right one devoid of an attribute.

By positioning the five wrathful emanations of the five Tathagatas in accordance with their corresponding directions, the bell can be seen as a mandala – a structure, symbolically supported by its five prongs, also symbolizing the five Tathagatas. The ghanta can be also interpreted as the vajra handle symbolizing the Buddha and his Dharma, and the Five Vidyarājas surrounding and protecting them.

There are only five extant works from the Koryō Dynasty of this type, speaking of a certain unpopularity of the Five Vidyarājas iconography on the Korean Peninsula. A remarkable less elaborate work is kept in the Nara National Museum, Japan. This bell belongs to the same iconography with insignificant stylistic and technical differences, mainly due to the less detailing casting technique and the trend to more general outlines.

A comparison between another Koryō ghanta kept in the Horim Museum and a 8th century vajra bell of the Tang dynasty, now in the Tokyo National Museum, reveals how close the Koryō vajra bell follows the Chinese examples in all iconographical and stylistic aspects. Among the common features can be pointed out the double bow (or, “animal claw”) shape of the vajra points typical for all Koryō dynasty examples, and the lower part of the bell shaped like a flower with five petals. But the most striking resemblance is the common sense of space – on both ghantas the reliefs of the deities occupy the whole surface of the cup, without leaving even the smallest bit of space unfilled with details and thus creating a dramatic impression of a bundle of energy. On the one hand this feature reveals an outstanding casting technique while on the other – a faithful following of the Tang paragon. The process of “domesticating” the subject and including it into the orbit of more “Korean” artistic vision

²² The Maha-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra II.40 See: Hodge, S. *The Maha-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra: With Buddhaguhya's Commentary*, London:Routledge, Curzon, 2003: 113

²³ Frederic, L. *Buddhism*: 203

²⁴ About this mudra in Beer, R. *Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Boston: Shambhala, 2003: 228

²⁵ Frederic, L. *Buddhism. Flammarion Iconographic Guides*, Paris: Flammarion, 1995:210

demonstrates the bell from the Nara National Museum. The Five Vidyarājas on this bell are cast each within its own separate panel, leaving free space between them thus revealing a more tempered and balanced sense of space. The handle differs greatly and the border between the handle and the bell is emphasized by an elegant band of large lotus petals.

Unlike the ghanta with reliefs of the Five Vidyarājas, those representing the Four Heavenly Kings with Indra and Brahma are numerous and build the majority of extant Koryō Dynasty vajra bells. Concerning the structure of the space, these bells demonstrate a stable model, already pointed out in the ghanta from the Nara Museum – the deities are placed within panels, permitting controlled arranging of the surface. In some cases this arrangement is implied by dynamicizing of the surface by six protruding sections in other these panels are simply delineated by lines, in third – the six sections are marked by pilasters.

This iconographical type of a vajra bell will be presented on one of the finest extant examples – the 13th century ghanta from Sanwe-sa temple. This bell is distinguished by its elaborately shaped three-pronged handle consisting of two outer and two inner prongs both forming beautifully shaped offshoots. The middle section of the handle consists of three baluster-like knobs. The transition between the handle and the bell is decorated by upward and downward wreath of lotus petals, its lower part resembling the lotus pedestals of seated Buddha and Bodhisattva images. Thus the lower section of the bell naturally serves as a pedestal for the upper section, the Four Kings, Indra and Brahma supporting and guarding the Diamond world symbolized by the vajra. Here the stratification within Mt. Meru cosmology is recalled, where the reborn soul has to pass through *Trayastrimsa* heaven (the dwelling place of Indra, Brahma and the Four Heavenly Kings) on its way to Nirvana. The symbolism of the placing of reliefs of the Four Heavenly Kings on the body of the ghanta closely resembles the same position on panels at the four sides of United Silla Dynasty stupas due to the analogy between the vajra handle and the stupa, both seen as the Buddha.

The Four Heavenly Kings - guardians of the four cardinal directions and residing on *Trayastrimsa* Heaven – the first heaven of the realm of desires on Mt. Meru, are presented in armor, trampling demons and each with his specific attribute – Vaisravana of the north, the chief of the four guardians holding a pagoda and a lance, Dhartarastra of the east grasping a sword in his two hands, Virudhaka of the south and Virupaksa of the west both holding a sword in the left hand. Indra and Brahma are clad in monastic robes, soaring on clouds, their heads surrounded by halos. All deities are represented in their wrathful aspect with wide-open mouths. This treat, not blending in with the centuries old tradition of depicting of these deities on Korean pagoda reliefs, can be singled out as a particular feature of their interpretation in the esoteric ritual. While the same iconography can be observed in the majority of the extant vajra bells of this type, an interesting motif is noticeable in the ghanta from the Taegu National Museum. Very much like the reliefs in Sōkkuram, the armor of the Four Heavenly Kings is complemented by heavenly sashes – a detail demonstrating their celestial nature.

A less typical example of Koryō bells in terms of iconography is the 13th century bell from the Kyōngju National Museum which is a rare example of a gilt-bronze *vajra* bell. Korean bells were mainly cast in bronze and gilded only on rare occasions. The five-pronged vajra section is pronouncedly curved to build a sphere. The handle is adorned with lotus petals ornament (K. *yōnp'an-munūi*) joint by a knot engraved with six projecting demon masks (K. *kuimyōn-munūi*). The lower section of the bell proper is dramatically extended and decorated with two figures of wrathful deities separated by reliefs of one-pronged vajras. Both are surrounded by nimbus, one represented semi-nude, with an upsweep, the other dressed in a monk's robe and wearing a crown. Such details as demon masks facing the four directions and two wrathful deities divided by vajras are often seen in Japanese vajra bells of the Kamakura period, such as the one in Hōgūsa Temple in Tokyo.

There exist only two examples of ghanta with reliefs of the Eight Classes of Beings (K. *P'albusinjang*) both of them reflecting the process of simplifying of the form and casting technique of vajra bells towards the end of Koryō dynasty. Figures of the Eight Classes of Beings in high relief surround the cup of the bell in the Ch'ōngju National Museum (transitional period from Koryō to Chosōn dynasty). They are seated frontally as if on a stool, with their legs hanging down. The schematization of the surface left plain marks the figures of the deities as well. It is found in the repetitive pattern of their postures and the uniformity and lack of details within the figures, their

coiffures, faces and hands rendered in only a general outline, and creating a humorous impression.

The fleeting character of the Lamaism influence in Korea is visible in the full cessation of the production of vajra scepters during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). The bells were still produced in small numbers but their form changed significantly due to the active import of Tibetan bells. This type of bell is undecorated with cast reliefs and thus devoid of the deep symbolism characteristic for the Koryŏ bells. The handle of these bells is mainly elongated and plain and the prongs are strongly reduced in size and simplified in form. Accordingly, their importance within the Buddhist ritual was reduced to their use as simply an attribute of monks who used it to attract the believers' attention to the Buddhist service, lecture or incantation.

The vajra scepters and bells must have been actively used in Koryŏ Buddhist ritual – rituals dedicated to esoteric emanations of Avalokitesvara and to protecting deities, such as the Four Heavenly Kings, Mañci, Mahāmayūri Vidyarāja, Aparājita Vidyarāja, Avataka and Yamāntaka were sponsored by the court and were common during the Koryŏ.²⁶ An important ceremony to protect the country was the so called “*sinjung toryang*” dedicated to the “host of spirits” (K. *sinjung*) where images of devas played central role. These rituals were conducted on a regular basis through the Koryŏ period and intensified in war time.²⁷

The Koryŏ vajra bell follows the Tang type rather than the Tibetan one though their doctrinal background belongs to the tantric range of ideas. The key element of the tantric ritual is the union of opposites - *samsara* and nirvana, wisdom and method, emptiness and compassion. Against this doctrinal background *vajra* and *vajra* bells appear as primary material evidence testifying to tantric practices performed in the Late Koryŏ period.

There are a number of still unanswered questions regarding the Koryŏ ghanta, mostly concerning their specific use in the ritual. As a further development on the topic it seems necessary to search for any possible relations between the iconography of the ghanta and the deities to whom was dedicated the ritual they were used in. Unfortunately, historical records with description of the exact use of these implements within the Koryŏ Buddhist ceremony have not yet been discovered.

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²⁶ Sørensen, Esoteric Buddhism in Korea: 72

²⁷ Pak Youngsook, “The Korean Art Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art” in: *Arts of Korea*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, pp. 402-451 : 440

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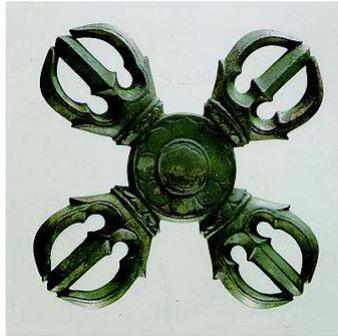
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Vajra scepter, 13-14th century,
Hüngdök-sa temple, 27.3cm, bronze



Crossed Vajra, 13-14th century,
13.5cm, bronze, Kyöngbuk
University Museum



Vajra scepter, 14th century,
Woljöng-sa, temple, bronze



Vajra bell, 14th century, Koryö Dynasty,
Ho-Am Art Museum, 21 cm, bronze



Vajra bell, 14th century, Koryö
Dynasty, Nara National Museum, 24.5 cm,
bronze



Vajra Bell, 8th century, Tang
Dynasty, 24.3 cm, Gilt bronze



Temple Bell, 13th century, Chöngju National
Museum, 27.4cm, bronze



Temple Bell, 13th century, Taegu National
Museum, 23 cm, bronze



Vajra bell, 14th century, Chöngju
National Museum, 22.4cm, bronze